

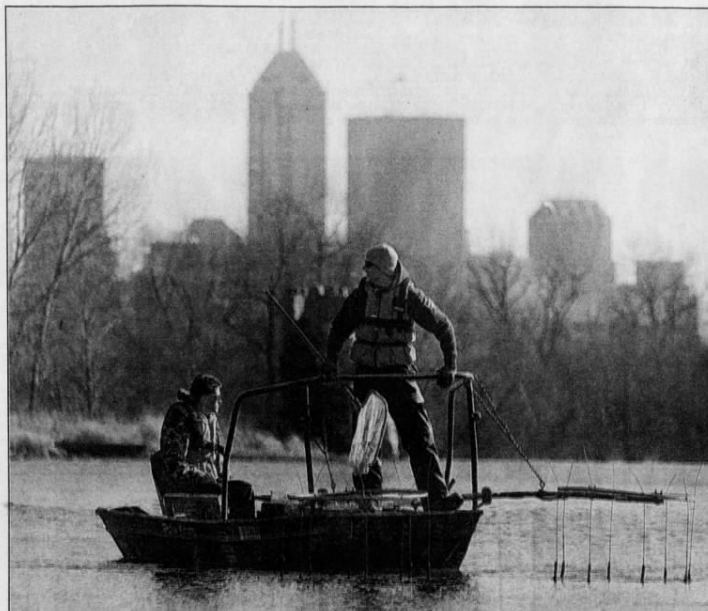
WHITE RIVER FISH KILL

New toxins may threaten river

More trouble at Anderson treatment plant worries officials

Search for life: Indiana Department of Natural Resources fish biologists Doug Keller (left) and Rhett Wisener search for live fish in White River as it flows through Indianapolis near Riverside Park. The two found bass, bluegill, sunfish and suckers alive in the damaged waterway. Biologists surveyed the length of the river from Waverly to Anderson to determine what life remains after a deadly discharge in the river.

Staff Photo / Steve Healey



■ Renewed threat came as agencies were cheered by fish count Thursday.

By John Masson
STAFF WRITER

All day Thursday, hope stirred amid one of the worst fish kills in Indiana history after state officials found more live species than they expected in the stricken White River.

But the hope turned to frustration Thursday evening with news of another bout of trouble at the Anderson wastewater treatment plant, and the attendant possibility of a renewed poisonous discharge.

At a hastily called 8:30 p.m. news conference, Commissioner Lori F. Kaplan of the Indiana Department of Environmental Management told a group of reporters and environmental activists that plant and department workers noticed a problem Thursday at the plant.

"Tonight we have new information that the plant . . . is experiencing excessive foaming," Kaplan said. "And some of that is moving into the river."

The foaming is an indication

that something is wrong, and could indicate a toxic discharge. While Kaplan stressed that it was too early to say what was causing the problem, she acknowledged that no one knows what another plume of toxins might mean for fish and other organisms already weakened by the original chemical discharge.

Staffers from IDEM were on hand at the plant, she added, and continued to sample the river to try to figure out what the problem is. Plant workers were adding chlorine in their process, as well. And IDEM notified health departments in Marion and Madison counties, as well as the Indianapolis Water Co., before calling the news conference.

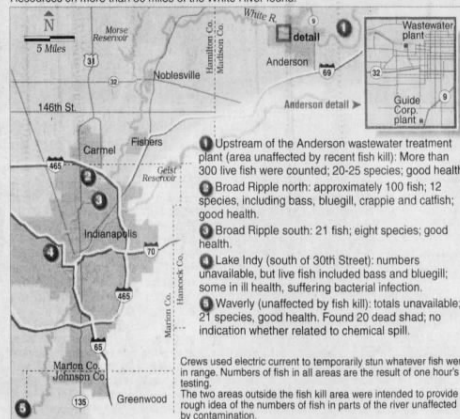
It was a bitter end to a day that started when workers from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources began checking for fish at six sites along the river and were pleasantly surprised by the results.

But they cautioned that re-

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Fish testing

Preliminary results of fish testing conducted Thursday by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources on more than 50 miles of the White River found:



Source: Steve Sellers, DNR.

Staff Graphic / Greg Nichols

RIVER

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of fishing they've been enjoying on a river that had been making a strong return to health before its latest crisis.

"It's not going to be next year what it was this year," said DNR spokesman Stephen Sellers. "But we're going to have to wait until next spring to find out exactly how serious the damage was."

And, perhaps, how serious it may yet become.

Thursday's tests were intended to get a quick snapshot of conditions more than three weeks after toxic chemicals entered the river through an Anderson wastewater treatment plant. The original spill caused one of the worst fish kills in state history.

"We're looking for survivors today," Sellers said.

And they found some. The whine of outboard motors and the chugging of a generator split the morning quiet near the Broad Ripple Park boat launch as two DNR workers "electrofished," using 520 volts of direct current.

The electricity stuns fish after first attracting them, explained DNR fisheries chief Bill James.

"It's like they can't help it," he said. After they're stunned, one of the workers gathers the floating fish with a net and plunks them in buckets. They're released after being inspected for signs of ill health.

Sellers was visibly relieved after a test run of just a few minutes landed DNR biologist Tom Flatt with a green sunfish and a brook silverside. Flatt carefully checked the two fish swimming groggily in his bucket.

It was an indication that conditions on the river weren't as bad as Sellers feared after poison killed

more than 30 tons of fish.

"When those guys found those two live fish ... boy, did I feel good," he said.

Later, DNR employees gathered more than 120 live fish over a one-hour period at Broad Ripple, Sellers said. At least 12 species were represented, including bass, bluegill, crappie and catfish.

In contrast, a one-hour test in untainted waters upstream of the Anderson sewage plant brought more than 300 fish of 20-25 species to the surface, Sellers said.

Two of the testing stations — the one north of Anderson's plant and a second at Waverly, downstream from the farthest point where ill effects have been noted — were designed to give experts a general idea of fish counts in unaffected stretches of the river.

The five stations inside the "kill zone" — downstream from Anderson, at Noblesville, two in Broad Ripple, and at Lake Indy on the Near Northside — can be contrasted with the other two stations to give biologists a preliminary estimate of the extent of the damage, James said. The results for Anderson and Noblesville were unavailable.

A report on the findings may be available in a couple of weeks. But for now Sellers is pleased with the preliminary findings.

"We at least got some encouraging results today, and we needed that," he said. "In the midst of all this, we found life."

Depending on what happens with the latest problem, the results also may assuage a public made nervous by the contamination of White River. The river normally supplies 60 percent of the city's drinking water.

The Indianapolis Water Co. has repeatedly assured residents their tap water is safe to drink, said

"It's really just too bad that this happened. But nature has a way, at least to a degree, of cleansing itself. Rivers have the ability to rejuvenate. The ironic thing is, the river had been getting better and better. We wouldn't have all these fish dying if the river hadn't been coming back."

Professor Tom McComish, director of the Aquatic Biology and Fisheries Center at Ball State University

spokeswoman Barb Sinclair. And Kaplan, the IDEM commissioner, said Thursday night's problem in Anderson shouldn't affect area drinking water.

Water company employees had been using up to three times as much chlorine as normal each day at their White River treatment plant, Sinclair said. Workers also lowered the amount of White River water distributed to their customers, and tinkered with pressures and flow directions in some of their mains. The result, according to Sinclair, was more than 35 water main breaks.

But the utility had been able to dramatically reduce its chlorine usage in recent days because one toxic chemical from the fish kill is no longer present in the river water.

Despite the relatively good news, Sellers took pains not to downplay the seriousness of the first contamination.

"Clearly, it's one of the most serious fish kills in Indiana history," he said. "It covers more than 50 miles of river, and we've lost hundreds of

thousands of fish."

The IDEM news conference came after a day of meetings with environmental activists in four counties. And IDEM representatives also had served court papers this week on Guide Corp., the Anderson automotive supplier that the department believes caused the first contamination.

The order formally accused Guide Corp. of discharging wastewater that ultimately polluted the river, and demanded that the discharge be stopped.

Kaplan said Guide appeared to be abiding by the order and appeared not to be the cause of Thursday's new problems.

"There's no indication that they were discharging," she said Thursday. "We don't have reason to believe that Guide Corp. caused the hit ... but we believe something was discharged to the (treatment) plant today."

She explained that she had very little information about the problem, but wanted to bring it to the public's attention sooner, rather than later. Her agency has been criticized for a slow response to the first fish kill.

Until more is known, experts hope the river can continue to heal itself.

"It's really just too bad that this happened," said Professor Tom McComish, director of the Aquatic Biology and Fisheries Center at Ball State University. "But nature has a way, at least to a degree, of cleansing itself. Rivers have the ability to rejuvenate."

That ability has been demonstrated before by White River, he added.

"The ironic thing is, the river had been getting better and better," he said. "We wouldn't have all these fish dying if the river hadn't been coming back."